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# THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE OF ART

VOLUME VII                      MARCH 1916                      NUMBER 5



HANDWROUGHT TEA SET WITH REED FLUTING BY ARTHUR J. STONE

## AMERICAN SILVER

BY HENRY P. MACOMBER

Secretary of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston

**H**OUSEHOLD silver probably has more constant use, by the whole family, during a longer time, than anything else in the home. It is therefore not surprising that the making of silver long ago reached a high state of perfection, and that fine pieces of silver are treasured as family heirlooms, beyond price. Just as in architecture, furniture, and decoration, the Colonial style is becoming more and more generally recognized and adopted as typically American, so in silverware an increasing number of our people are preferring modern reproductions of the ideas of our forefathers to the more elaborate styles of French and Italian origin. This is most desirable and encouraging, after the unfortunate and chaotic state of American taste during the greater part of the nineteenth century.

The early American silver was adapted from the middle Georgian of the England

of the Adam brothers, Hepplewhite, Fox and Kandler, whose work, in turn, was based on the classic lines of Greece, Rome and Pompeii. Colonial silver, which was at its best in the period between 1750 and 1820, is notable for its beauty of line and form and its subordination of decoration. Simple in design, substantial in weight, it reflects the character of the Colonists themselves. They were pioneers in a new country, they were people of strong and independent religious convictions, but many of them came from families of culture and refinement. It was natural for them to prefer purity of form and perfection of line and proportion to elaborateness of design. Silver which combined dignity and solidarity with usefulness was what appealed to them. The wars with their French-Canadian neighbors turned them against all things French and their hatred of Popery gave them a similar aversion to the work of

Italian craftsmen. It was to be expected that they would get their inspiration from England, their mother country, but their wide separation and limited means of travel fostered a certain vigorous originality.

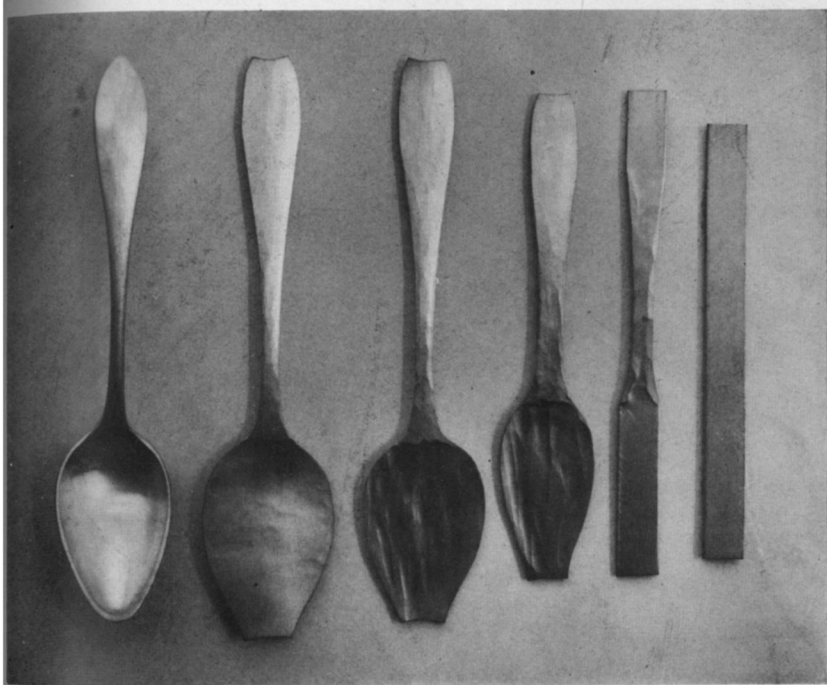
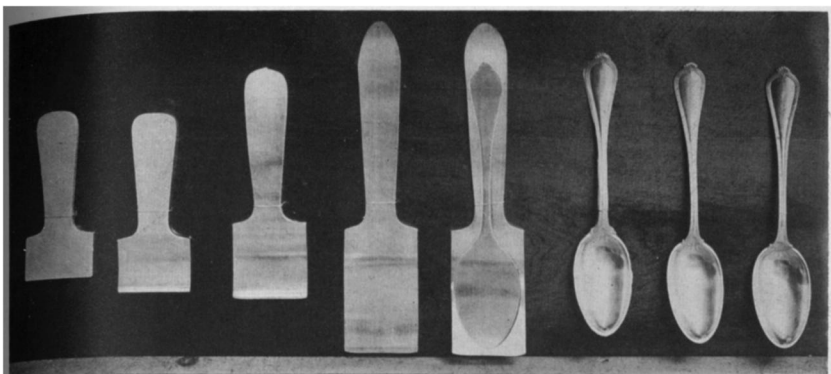
The silver of Puritan New England was naturally largely religious. E. Alfred Jones's invaluable book on "The Old Silver of American Churches" describes about 1640 pieces by American silversmiths dating before the year 1825, of which 262 belong to fifteen Boston churches. A very large number of silver beakers, tankards and cans are still in existence. They were adopted by the Puritans as communion cups because their simplicity and unsacerdotal character made them sufficiently different from the more elaborate cups of the Established Church to appease the independent New England conscience. As the Colonies grew prosperous there was a wide demand for silver, household as well as religious. Between 1650 and 1800 over 270 silversmiths were engaged in their craft in Boston, an equal number in New York and over 100 in Philadelphia. Inventories of the property left by some of the silversmiths of Boston, which before the Revolution was the most flourishing town in North America, show the great prosperity of these early craftsmen. A large part of the old ecclesiastical plate in the South is English, as these Colonies kept up closer relations with the mother country than did more independent New England.

The work done in silver in Colonial days by such men as Revere, Burt, Hull, Sander-son, Edwards, Moulton, Hurd and others, is all the more notable as being one of the first evidences of an appreciation of art in a new country which of necessity was chiefly engaged in the stern struggle for existence and material upbuilding. After this period was over, there was almost no development of the fine arts until the end of the nineteenth century. The decline did not come quite as soon as in England, for the Puritanical spirit of the Colonial silversmiths kept them from falling into the more florid designs which the decadent Georgian period developed in England.

In the wonderfully constructive period following the War of 1812, two factors were active in lowering the standard set by the

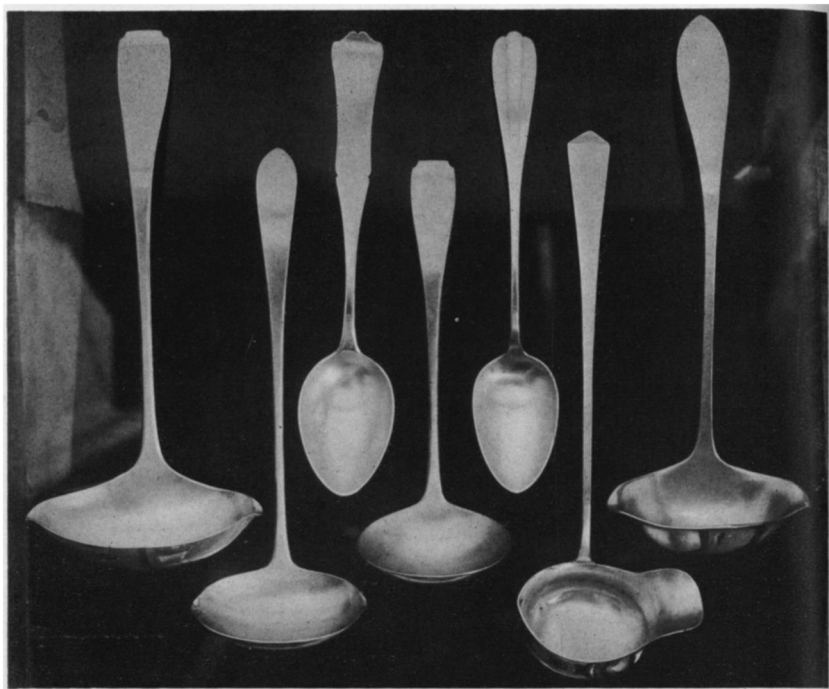
Colonial silversmiths. Through the rapid development of mechanical methods, silver came to be made by machine instead of by hand. At the same time the greatly increased output of silver bullion and the resulting lower price caused numerous factories to take up the manufacture of silver and in the competition which was the natural consequence, showiness and price were uppermost and art was almost forgotten. It was so easy to cast or stamp out elaborate borders which were applied with little regard for correctness and purity of style; and, by spinning and stamping, such complicated forms were possible that the silverware of this period has an excess of florid ornament that fits it only for the melting pot. In general it may be said that the abuse of mechanical methods, the cheapening of materials and competitive commercialism, together with the lack of any real demand for anything more artistic, were the causes of the decline of silversmithing in the nineteenth century, which was a century notable for its achievements in science rather than in art.

The Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876 is generally credited as marking the beginning of the awakening of art in America, while the Chicago Exposition saw the movement well under way. There were many underlying causes for this renaissance. With the coming of wealth and prosperity, higher education and foreign travel had been gradually developing American taste. There came about a natural reaction against over-decoration and the monstrosities which had been passing under the name of art. In England the new art movement begun by Ruskin, Morris and Cobden-Sanderson, had crystallized into the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society which began in 1888. This idea had been suggested by Ruskin ten years earlier. In December, 1878, he wrote to Morris: "How much good might be done by the establishment of an exhibition, anywhere, in which Right doing instead of Clever doing, of all that men know how to do, should be the test of acceptance." In England this movement was something of a revolt against the whole factory system and took on a socialistic nature which did not spread with it to America. But it was only nine years later,



**VARIOUS STAGES OF MAKING A SPOON (UPPER CUT) BY MACHINE (LOWER CUT) BY HAND**

**COURTESY OF THE TOWLE MANUFACTURING COMPANY**

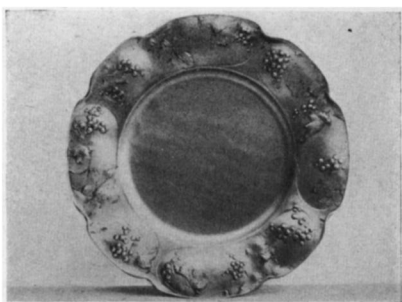


MODERN REPRODUCTIONS OF LADLES AND SPOONS BY KARL LEINONEN AND GEORGE BLANCHARD

in 1897, that a similar Society of Arts and Crafts was formed in Boston under the leadership of Charles Eliot Norton, probably the most intimate friend of Ruskin in America. True to its Colonial traditions, Boston still had a number of master craftsmen in silver and during the past eighteen years they have produced a notable amount of fine silver, mostly along the Colonial lines. Their work not only compares very favorably with any silver of this style which has ever been produced, but also has very appreciably influenced the character of the silver being made by the best American factories and helped turn the popular demand to the simple but beautiful Colonial style of silver.

It is rather an amusing recognition of the present demand for hand-wrought silver that we find factories hammering over a spun or die-stamped piece and even putting in the hammer marks by machine. Or the die itself is now hammered so that it stamps the piece with the hammer marks

all in. And in most cases these artificial hammer marks are large and plenty for good measure, and thus they may easily be distinguished from the real thing. Of course, it is a mistake to think that a piece of silver is necessarily good because it is hand-wrought or bad because it is machine-made. Hand-work requires a competent artist-craftsman, and much good silver has been spoiled by persons who have not had proper artistic training. On the other hand, one of the largest American companies, in recognition of the too great development of mechanical craftsmanship, has developed a line of silver following somewhat the style known as *l'art nouveau*, which is made at their factory entirely by hand as individual pieces without any exact duplication. Its decoration is in a flowing, naturalistic style, quite the opposite of the Colonial. But there are on the market quite a number of patterns reproduced from Colonial models which are a great credit to the companies producing them. These companies have



MODERN REPRODUCTIONS AND DESIGNS EXECUTED BY THE GORHAM COMPANY

well trained art directors and designers, and the silver is of a high artistic merit as well as of a technical execution hitherto unequalled. For example, the spoons and forks of today are much stronger than those of Colonial times. In rolling the metal out for the drop hammer the piece is thickened through the shank of the handle and the heel, thus giving extra weight to the points of greatest wear and strain. Hand-wrought flatware is also made with this reinforcement.

While it may have been the abuse rather than the use of the machine which has been responsible for much of the bad silver today and in the past, it must be contended that to be truly a work of art a piece of silver must have something of the personality of its maker, which is out of the question under factory methods of subdividing mechanical work and is only possible where a master-craftsman designs and executes the piece from beginning to end.